

Food aid has become one of the most controversial and most emotional subjects within the total aid picture, and indeed within the total picture of relations between richer and poorer countries. The contributions in this issue of the *Bulletin* testify to the wide range of attitudes and opinions, running the gamut from the condemnation of food aid by the British Foreign Secretary in a recent speech (p 2) to whole-hearted support in the Brandt Report (p 15). These statements and others by the new Executive Director of the World Food Programme and the Lappé and Collins team are reproduced in this *Bulletin*.

Part of this tremendous variety of opinion is due to the variety of food aid itself. There is programme food aid — food supplied for bulk sale or bulk distribution as budgetary or balance of payments support — as against project food aid such as food for work, school feeding or mother/child health clinic support; there is bilateral and multilateral food aid; there is food aid in cereals and in dairy and other products; there is emergency food aid; there is food aid to 'good' countries with an effective food strategy and food aid to 'bad' countries without one; there is closely conditional and strictly monitored food aid and food aid which is given more-or-less on trust with a sigh of relief for getting rid of unwanted surpluses, etc. Each of these forms of food aid has its own protagonists and enemies. Often the critics or protagonists talk about different types and methods of food aid. The controversial nature and diversity of views becomes less surprising when this is remembered.

Food aid is often compared with 'financial' aid. This may or may not be appropriate. Food aid treated as additional to financial aid is one thing, food aid given in place of financial aid is quite another. There is also a question whether a direct comparison of food aid is appropriate: financial aid is only a catch-all for a variety of forms of assistance including limited, unrestricted, quickly disbursible flows to long term and often tied capital assistance which has to be

converted into commodities. In this sense it may be said that there is no such thing as financial aid and that all aid is commodity aid (perhaps with the rare exception of aid given strictly for strengthening foreign exchange reserves).

If the editors can put their own cards on the table we would say that both general condemnation and general advocacy of food aid is pointless. Food aid provides an opportunity to promote growth or reduce poverty in poorer countries; this opportunity may be taken or it may be wasted. That depends on the way food aid is being given and the way it is being absorbed. It depends on the purposes of the donor countries and even more so on the policies and efficiency of the recipients.

The contributions to this collection are organised around two themes: first, the changing patterns of food aid and, second, establishing the past impact of food aid. There has been a time lag in wider recognition of the changing patterns of food aid since the Vietnam war and the food crisis of 1972-74 to which Edward Clay draws attention. Perhaps the most significant development has been the negotiation of a new Food Aid Convention in 1980 setting an internationally agreed floor to the level of food aid flows. This is described by J. C. Parotte who was centrally involved as Secretary General of the International Wheat Council in the negotiations. The setting of floor levels for food transfers implies recognised and accepted notions of how much food aid will be needed, and Barbara Huddleston looks again at the difficult question of food aid requirements for the 1980s recognising the constraints which exist on the developmental uses of food aid. Food aid has been widely criticised as being an instrument of 'market development' for developed country exporters. John Shaw provides an example of how food aid could be used innovatively to provide a market and develop exporting capability of a Third World grain surplus producer, Zimbabwe.

As Simon Maxwell argues, establishing the record on food aid's impact offers opportunity for improving the

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planning and management of programmes and projects. But as the contributions by Gordon Nelson, Tony Jackson and Chris Stevens also underscore, this task of impact assessment is far from simple. Gordon Nelson, in contrast to the broadly negative conclusions of earlier analysts, such as Clay and Stepanek, shows that the evidence on the impact of food aid to Bangladesh can be interpreted quite positively depending on the period under scrutiny. Tony Jackson reviews the recent assessments of European

food aid in two of which there was IDS involvement. Chris Stevens considers lessons to be drawn from Jackson's own polemic against project food aid. For those whose interest is now aroused, a brief bibliography is included here by Edward Clay and Elisabeth Everitt on the burgeoning literature on food aid.

*Edward Clay
Hans Singer*

The UK and Food Aid: a Sceptical View

I want to draw attention here to my concern that food aid accounts for such a large share of the European Community's aid programme. Of course food aid has a special role in emergencies. None of us can see starving children on our television sets without wanting immediately and directly to try to relieve their hunger. But most food aid is not used to remedy disasters. It goes, at considerable expense, to provide free imports to the receiving country. Sometimes it goes, at even greater expense, to support particular projects through 'food for work' or supplementary feeding schemes. But all too often, on the way, it can actually make things worse. Free or cheap food for people in the towns, or for specially favoured groups, can hold down the prices the farmer would otherwise receive. When this happens, incentives to increase production of food and other agricultural products are undermined. Market forces are distorted. Necessary reforms are put off. Food aid can accustom people to new diets and create a demand for imports which did not previously exist. Eventually these imports must be paid for, making the payments problem worse. Dairy products, which take up two thirds of the Community's food aid programme, are in most cases a peculiarly inappropriate form of aid.

These facts and consequences must be faced up to.

What I would like to see is a much broader effort, by the Community and by other food aid donors, to support the attempts of developing countries to put in place more efficient, sensible and market-oriented policies of their own to boost farming and food production of all kinds. Food aid does have a place in this, but in my view a smaller and more carefully considered place than now. I am glad that Commissioner Pisani has already voiced such an approach, and I look forward to a reduction in Community food aid — especially in dairy products — and a more efficient and flexible form of development aid.

The Foreign Secretary, The Rt Hon Francis Pym, MP,
in an address to the Royal Commonwealth Society, London,
7 December 1982.